

Breastfeeding Protect Children in Emergencies

Joint Statement by Bangladesh Breastfeeding Foundation, WHO and UNICEF

DHAKA, 28 November 2007: About 300,000 under 5 children make up half of the child population badly hit by Cyclone Sidr on 15 November. In the emergency situation where food supplies are disrupted and access to safe water is extremely limited, the affected children remain highly vulnerable to diarrhoea, ARI and other cold-related diseases.

The prevalence of malnutrition among children in Bangladesh is among highest in the world. Natural disasters such as the cyclone Sidr worsened it further. Infants have specific nutritional needs and are born with a weak immune system. Breast milk provides the best food and immune support, which protect the infants from the worst of emergency conditions. The health risk for babies who are not breastfed can be significantly higher.

Past experience in different emergency situations has shown that huge amounts of infant formula and powder milk are donated as relief materials. Some donations are a direct result of appeals through the media for baby food. In the confusion that surrounded emergencies, these products are often distributed and used in an uncontrolled way for feeding babies instead of breast milk. Supply of infant formula and other breast milk substitutes poses a threat to optimal breast feeding, proper complementary feeding practices and in the circumstance sometimes breastfed mothers convert to infant formula feeding.

Formula feeding or powder milk also requires resources such as clean water, clean pots and fuel to prepare, which are often difficult to find in cyclone affected areas. This means that infants who are not breastfed become even more vulnerable to infection, diarrhea, malnutrition pneumonia, bronchiolitis and other illnesses. Babies with diarrhea and acute respiratory infections become severely malnourished and dehydrated which puts them at real risk of death.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Government of Bangladesh, World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF issued a joint statement on August 2007 on *Ensuring optimal feeding of infants and young children during emergencies in Bangladesh*. The statement emphasized the need for exclusive breastfeeding for first six months to meet nutritional requirement for infants followed by continued breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding from six months up to two years. The statement also stressed the need to continue breastfeeding at all time especially during emergency situation. A copy of the document is attached for your ready reference.

Newborn infants should begin to breastfeed within 1 hour of birth. The complementary feeding should be hygienic and home based from the family pot, soft and pasted. The powder milk, their products and other foods which are distributed in the affected areas should be given to children older than 2 years, mothers and other members of a family under supervision.

Bangladesh Breastfeeding Foundation, WHO and UNICEF appeal to all concerned to be cognizant of the importance of continued breastfeeding for infants in emergencies. We greatly appreciate the immediate and massive response both from national and international organizations to assist the cyclone survivors. While serving the affected people, we must not lose sight of what is best for infants and children and create an environment in which, even

faced with some difficulties, mothers are encouraged to optimal breastfeeding and proper complementary feeding of their children in the special circumstances following the cyclone.



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